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A FRENCH LOVE POET OF THE 'NINETIES

BY GUSTAVE VAN ROOSBROECK
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ONE of the most intimate and tender of the love poets of modern France is Albert Samain. It was not his, indeed, to sing the joyful possession of love; but few have expressed with greater poignancy the timorous yearning for love, its world of dream and vague desire. Not impressive nor high-sounding is his note. All in minor key, it is the breathing of songs "*sans rien qui pèse ou qui pose.*" Like the music of a far-off harp in the dusk, they set us dreaming of pale hands folded vainly in prayer—of flowers withering before daybreak—of children's souls in pale evenings full of pain. For he has deeply felt and transcribed the melancholy and pensive grace of dying things, the mortal faintness of autumn and dead dreams, the hopeless languor of desires never fulfilled.

Small and shy, dying still young after protracted illness, Samain suffered all his life from almost morbid self-distrust. Without ambition or initiative, he submitted to the monotonous routine of the life of a government clerk, content in dreams to fancy himself a triumphator, riding through life in high pride and glory. In the struggle for existence he was beaten in advance. Above the gray monotony of his daily life he had built cloud-palaces of imaginary splendor that were the tabernacles of his soul. But nothing in his appearance, except perhaps his lustrous dark eyes, gave hint of the strange luxurious desires we feel throbbing in his poems. Mr. Gosse gathered from Samain's acquaintance that he was pale and slight, excessively near-sighted and seeming to "have no cognizance of the world about him." It is agreed that he was simple in habit, chary of word and gesture, except rarely when fired by emotion, and quiet,—curiously quiet, as if withdrawn into the privacy of his dreams. Without pretension he lived his limited and solitary life, with his

mother and a friend or two; in the barest simplicity he went through his days, without adventure.

And therein lies the tragedy of Samain—or, if that is a word of too great dignity to apply to so gentle a spirit, the *pathos* of his case—that he must remain solitary and not understood, wanting that which he craved and needed most, the loving sympathy of a woman. Woman! She was for Samain an awe-inspiring and unapproachable creature. Many were received by her who had slight gifts to offer, taken into high favor, while he, fearful and with overflowing heart, bearing his golden cup, as it were, shyly and prayerfully—he remained far from the holy place, with his never-stilled desire.

I

The refined art of Samain¹ was admired, as much as thirty years ago, by a small circle of devotees in various countries. Although dating from a time of effervescence in French poetry, from the emergence of Symbolism, although too studied and too ethereal to have a wide appeal, much of his work has shown a tenacious vitality, and remains fresh and true even now when the ultra-aesthetic work of the early 'nineties in France has so largely passed into oblivion. Twenty-five years ago, his brocaded and hieratic symbols, his tired and exotic grace, were enthusiastically acclaimed in foreign countries as well as in France, and found sympathetic response in the poetry, for example, of Belgium and of South America. This was the period of his first volume, *Au Jardin de l'Infante*, in which he represents his soul as "*une infante en robe de parade*," whose greyhounds hunt for her symbolic beasts in the forest of Dream and Enchantment. More recently his admirers have instinctively turned towards the verses of his later period, particularly *Le Chariot d'or*, which reveal more directly the heart, or as he would say, the soul, of the poet. For sophisticated as his work may often be, a blend of genuine feeling with sentiments assumed for effect, we glimpse his soul through it as a light, shining clearly at times, and at times but dimly showing as through stained or smoky glass.

¹ *Au Jardin de l'Infante*, 1898; *Aux Flancs du vase*, 1898; *Le Chariot d'or*, 1901; *Polyphème*, 1906.

It was about 1880 that he began to write. Scientific positivism had come to pervade both thought and art. Naturalism reigned in prose; Zola and the early Huysmans were reproducing the lowest life, brutal scenes tragic with the pain of sordid reality. Poetry had undergone the same influence. The Parnassians showed the positivist spirit in their preference for the visible world, for the picturesque surface of things. The cold and polished art of Hérédia is produced by almost wholly objective means. The broad canvasses of Leconte de Lisle, with their glaring colors and tropical splendor of light, seem a glorification of matter. Philosophy was dominated by materialism and the experimental method. The heavens were empty; faith seemed but the superstitious voice of the past. And yet the will to believe was strong; poetry could not be long content with an external beauty however perfect, and there came about a self-conscious revival of the "soul" in art. In the Latin Quarter and at Montmartre a reaction was impressively announced in the *cénacles*: the renaissance of the subjective in literature,—an art of more intimate feeling and more refined thought. Samain was associated with the insurgents in the companies of the "Hydropathes," the "Hirsutes," and "Nous autres"—the "Others" of that day. They craved a new style, new subject-matter, and a fresh outlook on life. Verlaine and Baudelaire they acclaimed as apostles, having adopted for their device the latter's verse:

Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!

It was in their noisy gatherings that Samain read his early verse; there he made acquaintance with the aesthetes, the bohemians, the eccentrics, the *râtés*, the "decadents," who made up the picturesque mob of insurgents against tradition. But he went to their meetings more to escape his solitude and isolation than because he felt in sympathy with their vehement Jacobinism. He was no man of coteries, but in habit a recluse, and in thought an introspective dreamer. The outward world he did not study; but he gazed into the depths of his own soul, noting there the shades of delicate feeling, whatever was most tenuous and impalpable in his emotions.

If he took color from his surroundings, if he was inspired by

his contemporaries, it was as much by reading as by personal contact. He had indeed a certain feminine plasticity and adaptiveness of spirit which enabled him to assimilate the tone of sentiment of the poets whom he read with sympathy. He readily adopted their forms and their intellectual attitudes; and throughout his earlier period his work reflects a continuous series of poetic influences. In a historical point of view he may be looked on as a poet of transition. In a time of literary revolutions, of poetic tendencies sharply distinguished, he was an example of conciliation, of the discreet combination of opposing forces. By disposition and birthright he was a romantic. Werther, René, Adolphe, Rolla seem reincarnated in his nostalgic, vaguely suffering soul; all his life long he remained an admirer of Musset. The exotic feeling of Hérédia's *Trophées* is clearly the inspiration for poems such as his sonnets on Cleopatra. From the symbolists he has his indirect method of presenting his moods and thoughts by means of suggestive images. With the reading of Verlaine he evolves towards the *chanson grise*. It was not until his friendship with Francis Jammes, the poet of simplicity, that he learned to turn away his eyes from books and go to life itself for inspiration.

II

But of all the literary influences that were impressed upon his earlier poems, the strongest are perhaps those of the Parnassians and of Baudelaire. It is here that one feels most how strangely he is dressing himself out and disguising his natural feeling in *robes de parade*. It was almost naïvely that Samain—the poet of shivering emotion, the supersensitive lyricist—made pretense of going about to carve deliberately cold verses of perfect form. In an early profession of poetic faith, when he was baptized in Parnassian waters, he declares that marble alone is god in his pagan heart, that he has dreamed of building in verse a chaste Ionian temple—

*Ainsi, dans le bleu pur de ma sérénité,
Sur le rare Paros d'un sonnet dense et riche,
Je sculpterai mes vers avec solennité.*

Still more superficial was his assumption of Baudelairism. Poet of simple feeling, sweet and melancholy yearning, what has he to do with this mental perversity, this search for strange sins, bizarre sensations, unnatural imaginings? This was a curious and clever assimilation of a state of mind. The sacerdotal cruelty and lasciviousness of Samain's princesses is displayed in a setting of antique gardens, with crumbling marble staircases smothered under roses, as on a stage curtain. His pretended fevers of the flesh, chanted in liturgical style, were very much in the current mode: Tristan Corbière having indited his *Litanies du sommeil*, Louis Denise his *Litanies du silence*, Dubus his *Litanies de l'amante*, not to speak of Iwan Gilkins' *Litanies in La Nuit* and Baudelaire's *Hymn to Satan*. It is in this style that Samain conceived his hymn to Lust, in which he invokes *Luxure* ("O très occulte, O très profonde!") as a purple star in the sad sky of the world, as a black idol, an immortal empress, a leper of gold, and as

*Appétit du péché mortel, et soif et faim.
Goufre, soleil sans ombre et spirale sans fin.*

Léon Bocquet, in his book on Samain, remarks justly that this state of mind was purely intellectual. It is the fanciful toying of an aesthete, in which the poet attributes to himself, in dramatic wise, the Saturnalian appetites of an Heliogabalus or the ideal purity of Paradisaical loves. The Baudelaire cult of the time did indeed degenerate in some cases into an actual erotomania. It was the period of Huysmans' *A Rebours* and Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas*. But Samain's Baudelairism, like his Parnassian impassivity, was pose, attitude, literary make-believe. These were but hieratic gestures copied from some ancient monument, imperial vestments borrowed from some museum of antiquities. The manner of Baudelaire, the manner of Hérédia, of Leconte de Lisle, of Mallarmé: these were masks half-consciously assumed by one who as yet knew not his own face. The real Samain was not at all so perverted and hard and bitter, so analytic and tragical; but rather simple and elegiac, gently sad and painfully sensitive.

And so we may follow in his work the gradual evolution from a

sumptuous and esoteric symbolism towards a greater simplicity of art, from far-sought images and elaborated diction towards a more natural manner of expression, from an over-curious introspection towards the broader feeling of life. It was less an evolution proper than the process of self-discovery; it was the process of putting off one disguise after another.

There is one poem in the *Jardin de l'Infante* in which Samain signalizes his conversion. He refers to the *fleurs du mal* which had bloomed in his disquieting dreams—

Fleurs suspectes, miroirs ténébreux, vices rares.

But now the poet's soul is weary of these unnatural stimulants, weary of his strange ceremonial parade, of the tinsel glitter of intellectual Vanity Fair; and he longs to come back home to the "white house," and to enter again into the truth of his own heart—

Et rentre enfin dans la vérité de ton coeur.

This may be our introduction to the true Samain, the poet of *Le Chariot d'or*. Most of all does he reveal himself in the Elegies included in this volume, poems of a seductive tenderness and delicacy, the flowering growth of sincerity and heart-felt emotion. Here we have no longer the acrobatic performance of a clever "intellectual," the restless search for psychological rarities, but the unaffected voice of desire and resignation, the sincere utterance of the passion of love.

III

This love is at once a genuine personal sentiment and a symptom of the times. It is (if the reader will forgive us for speaking so of the sacred passion in the dialect of the decade) of those "aesthetic 'nineties" that echo still in so many sonnets. It is at the same time languid and passionate, of the flesh and of the spirit; and it is always, what the poet calls it himself, a twilight love, "*un amour de crépuscule*."

This is not the love of a Byron or a Hugo, stormy, rebellious, imperious. It is all made up of dreamy longing, of melancholy contemplation, of echoes faintly reverberating in the chambers of

the soul. The poet is on his knees before the memory of his love as before a casket of treasured jewels—

*Ton souvenir est comme un coffret de reliques
Ou dorment des joyaux d'amour mélancholiques.*

He looks forward to the intimate communion of love as an occasion for uttering the unappeasable sadness of his soul—

*Je ne te dirai rien, sinon que je suis triste. . . .
Telle une fleur qu'on coupe et qui douce à souffrir
Ne sait rien qu'exhaler ses parfums et mourir.*

The thought of death is forever in his mind; and the lover, in the act of gazing into the eyes of his loved one, is seized with the desire to carry her off, so living, into death.

The desire for death reflects both the physical exhaustion of the sick man and the mystical exaltation of the lover. Like Keats, Samain had always been "half in love with easeful death." In his sensitiveness to beauty and to pain, he had always felt in his anguished heart an indefinable and mortal sweetness—

Je ne sais quoi de doux, qui voudrait bien mourir.

His fevered senses and imagination made him seek in love for those melting raptures in which all sensation is dissolved in a kind of sentient unconsciousness. He dreams of whispering the secrets of love

*Avec une langueur si tendre et si profonde
Qu'en la sentant sur toi, ta chair, toute, se fonde.*

He dreams of tranced silences, of words spoken in a feverish languor, words that die upon the lips, and that cause the eyes to close in ecstasy—

*Tout l'espace languit de fièvres.
Du fond des cœurs mystérieux
S'en viennent mourir sur les lèvres
Des mots qui font fermer les yeux.*

We are familiar with this in English,—in English poetry, still more in English painting. We know well these closed eyes of the "Blessèd Beatrice." We are not so well accustomed to the appearance of a prayerful or religious spirit in the full panoply of sensuous appeal. We may be used to the floating perfume of

La Robe, which plays so large a part in evoking the reveries of the Parisian poet, though it would be hard to name an English poet in whom this perfume so heavily weights the atmosphere. As for *La Jupe*, we know it not; we have not known it since the Augustan days, when the eternal Petticoat played its whimsical part in eclogue and mock-heroic. We are not ready to have signalized too explicitly in verse the part the senses play in the tender sentiment. We do not like to have so much made of the "warm shivers," to have the heavens themselves conceived as full of love like a vapor generated from a woman's scented dress. The Platonism of Shelley does not seem to us indelicate. But we are inclined to question, not indeed the truth, but the delicacy, of the way the French poet turns from the individual woman to Woman Herself, "lake profound, lure or trap, what matters it?" and dwells upon that delicious sob which rolls from the depths of Man towards Woman's Eyes,—

. . . *cet éternel sanglot délicieux*
Qui roule du profond de l'homme vers tes yeux.

What we do find natural to our race-feeling, in these latter days, is the conception of love in terms of religion, of a lover on his knees before the loved one's eyes, or exhaling all his heart like a censer, of the voices of lovers "rising, pure in the shade, like prayers." Such a mystical feeling of love, common enough in mediaeval poetry, has had its beautiful rebirth in the poems of Rossetti, not to mention other poets English and French. It is the special combination of the mystical and the carnal, by which the French poet can sing of his lady's "angelic flesh" or of a "sensual and pensive kiss," which makes us pause where we never blink at the loves of the Pre-Raphaelites.

IV

There is one conceit of the French lover which suggests the imagery of the Pre-Raphaelites at the same time that its modish prettiness makes it incompatible with the spirit of breathless awe which pervades their writing. He loves to think of his soul as a pale lily worn by his mistress in her corsage; not less than twice he

makes this comparison so suggestive of the Parisian genius for personal adornment:

Mon âme—comme un lys!—passée à ta ceinture.

One recognizes the symbolist origin of this image, albeit applied with so much of the conscious sense for costume. Samain reflects in his imagery the poetic fashions of his time, and particularly the reader notes the recurrence of the favorite symbols of the Urn, the Swan, the Enchanted Lake, and, in various connections, the Lily.

The new rhetoric is also to be felt in the lavish use of adjectives of vague and suggestive feeling,—“infinite,” “divine,” “sublime,” “unspeakable,” “ineffable.” It is by reaction from the hard objectivity of the Parnassians that the poets of that day, wishing to render the life of the soul rather than that of the eyes, indulge so freely in terms purely suggestive in import. This subjective, or, as we loosely say, impressionistic, character is felt in all the landscapes of Samain. He seldom gives us precise details of scenery, an exact notation of what he sees. More often he refers, in general terms, to what he smells, that being the more vaguely and yet poignantly evocative of the senses. And still more often he tells us what he *feels*, giving us the general sense of the emotion of a sunset or a warm summer evening, generally by means of some comparison. A pale autumn is bleeding at the end of the avenue, or the evening is as tender as a woman’s face. He has indeed a remarkable faculty for calling up the heavy, fragrant, dreamy atmosphere of summer nights, in which soul and sense yield themselves to the seductions of languorous beauty. But it is always the *general* impression that he renders. He is always inviting us to dreams, like Verlaine; it is always with him “the exquisite hour”; but he never gives us a picture so fine and precise as that of Verlaine in his most exquisitely evocative studies—

*L'étang reflète,
Profond miroir,
La silhouette
Du saule noir
Où le vent pleure. . . .
Rêvons, c'est l'heure.*

Samain has not enriched poetry, like his friend Francis Jammes or his contemporary Tristan Corbière, by the introduction of new material from nature, manners, the life of the street. His flora is confined to the roses and lilies long sacred to poetic art. His landscapes are lovely but traditional; his acquaintance with nature is apparently limited to the parks and boulevards of Paris; it is there that he finds his swans and moonlit lakes, his avenues of lindens and his bleeding sunsets. The atmosphere of Paris he does evoke with most persuasive and insinuating potency,—Paris in spring at the blossoming of the chestnuts, Paris at grey dusk or wrapped in the pensiveness of autumn mist, above all Paris late at night in spring or summer, the deserted quays, the languid swirling water, the soul of flowers abroad, the shadowy masses of foliage, the trees shivering in the warm currents of air.

Thoroughly Parisian is the delicate grace, the refinement of taste, with which this poet sets his scene and arranges his effects. There is never a harsh or jarring note in his picture or in his song. He paints in water colors, and his sentiment is always at home in an arrangement of blue and silver and rose and mauve. These delicious colors find their counterpart in the charmingly modulated harmonies of the verse. Samain is very scrupulous in matters of technique, conservative and even conventional in his handling of the Alexandrine or of slighter forms, of the sonnet or the couplet or the quatrain. This gives him a peculiar facility in the many poems in which he revives the spirit of Watteau or Fragonard, delicate and finished painters as exquisite and fragile as a butterfly's wing. When he calls up the spirit of old Versailles, "*cet air vieille France*," or when, in slight and graceful verse, he sings of the Fortunate Isle, or renders, as to some faint-voiced ancient instrument, an Arpeggio or an Invitation to Cythera, he displays the art of a painter of fans for queens who play at being shepherdesses.

In such poems he shows a delicate sensuousness not merely Parisian but distinctly feminine. He had a woman's love of perfumes and flowers. "*Quand je me sens devenir pessimiste*," he said, "*je regarde une rose*." He took a voluptuous pleasure in watered silks of changing hue, in the changing lights of rare stones, in finely wrought jewels and filmy lace; and long hours he dreamed

away under the spell of music. Verlaine had preceded him with his *Fêtes Galantes*, moving in the same atmosphere of playful sensuousness of the French painters of the old régime. The imagination of Samain responded to the glamor of those times of artificial refinement, mannered politeness and sentiment, with a tinge of smiling cynicism, and the somewhat dilettante enjoyment of a life scented with all that was delicate and voluptuous. Life seemed a bark laden with flowers and silks, gliding over cool waters towards Cythera, island of luminous and ideal pleasures—

*Les gondoles sont là, fragiles et cambrées
Sur l'eau dormeuse et sourde aux enlacs mourants,
Les gondoles qui font, de roses encombrées,
Pleurer leurs rames d'or sur les flots odorants.*

It is in such an atmosphere that Samain can breathe his songs of ethereal sentiment almost too frail for words. Some of his verses are as delicate as the pollen powdering over the velvet whiteness of water-lilies which one is fearful lest even a wind should stir. Such is the whole of the poem entitled *Keepsake*, from which we can find room for only the concluding lines:

*Dans un parfum d'héliotrope diaphane
Elle mourait, fixant les voiles sur la mer,
Elle mourait parmi l'automne . . . vers l'hiver. . . .
Et c'était comme une musique qui se fane. . . .*

We are solicited by a wealth of verses by Samain of the same frail, dewy, crystalline expression. His feminine nature made him most happy in these trembling, indecisive, softly undulating rhythms. As he writes of himself,

*J'adore l'indécis, les sons, les couleurs frêles,
Tout ce qui tremble, ondule, et frissonne, et chatoie,
Les cheveux et les yeux, l'eau, les feuilles, la soie,
Et la spiritualité des formes grêles.*

And in his Notes we find him writing: "I dream now of composing little things, light and exquisite, made of nothing and deliciously suggestive, like certain slight Chinese poems. They ought to be fragile and precious as porcelain, like tiny porcelain cups, from which one drinks a drop of concentrated tea, whose fragrance lingers for hours."

The classic evocations, *Aux Flancs du vase* and the poetic drama, *Polyphème*, represent the later craving of Samain for clearness and simplicity. These are not done, however, in the manner of Leconte de Lisle and the Parnassians, who painted the Greek life coolly and with exclusive attention to its picturesque possibilities. In *Polyphème* we fancy we hear the voice of the poet himself in the complaints of the unfavored lover, so touching and personal is the note. And it is with something like emotion that, in *Aux Flancs du vase*, he presents the primitive shepherds,—these sweet dreamers of clear idylls, sitting beside opal seas in the shimmer of diluted sunlight, their white figures harmonious in the calm blue of luminous skies and strands. And these scenes from ancient life are traced with a draughtsmanship and a sentiment as modern, and as unmistakably Parisian, as the paintings of Le Sidaner or the etchings of Legros.

V

But it is natural that Samain should be most prized for those Elegies in which the same refined taste is employed in the declaration of his most intimate and tender feeling. Sometimes, in reading his more personal verse, we feel ourselves in the intimacy of a quiet room, amid the uproar of a great city,—a quiet room with greyish walls, where something lingers like a pang of regret for joys that have died, white roses withering in silver bowls, and the air heavy with strange dissolving odors. And the evening is holy and sweet as the smile of a dying child,—seen through the open window, the pearl-grey and purple evening, tranced in dream. And the whispering poetry of Samain is as the voices of bells falling like rose-petals, frail and rosy white—like the sweet plaint of far bells in the mellow twilight of our seclusion.

His place is not among the builders of powerful and monumental art, but among the most refined of the minor poets, such as Max Elskamp, Georges Rodenbach, who gave expression to an exquisite and finely discriminating sense of life rather than to any large-visioned and forceful interpretation. Read the whispering songs of Samain along with the sonorous, bronze-hammered declamation of Verhaeren, and you will have a vivid

realization of the difference between the passive and the active manner of taking life. Samain himself felt it. "Certain wild, dishevelled and splendid geniuses are like torches shaken in the wind, full of dazzling magnificence and tragical glory; and with our admiration for them is always mingled some degree of uneasiness and dismay. Others burn like beautiful lamps, with sweet and equal light; one feels about them a certain quiet intimacy, and one loves them perhaps the better for it." An artist betrays himself in his preferences as well as in his own performance. And Samain reveals his own nature when he indicates his preference for the simpler poets whose work contains a more quiet and perhaps more minute delineation of tender feeling. He too was a soul burning "like a beautiful lamp, with sweet and equal light."

The poet's body, his physiological make-up, may be regarded as, what Nietzsche called it, his "larger Ego,"—as the ground from which of necessity such and such an art, such and such feelings and ideas, must be produced. Samain, who was of feeble constitution, and who died of tuberculosis, was the very incarnation of the pathetic tenderness and weary resignation of his poems. The realization that he was dying awoke in him no intellectual storms as in Pascal, no such insurgency as in his contemporary, the rare and ironical Jules Laforgue. He never fought—he bowed his neck. The fear of death mellowed in him to melancholy. He seems to be sinking in deep and dark waters, with meek and submissive, though reluctant, consent to the unavoidable. Slowly there grew in him an all-embracing, but inactive, pity for those who suffer,—trampled beneath the feet of the struggling mob, worn out with anguish of body and mind. He considered himself a brother to all those who had to drink the same bitter wine from the same dark cup. "I do not know," he wrote, "if it is related to some morbid tendency of my mind, but never have I felt more profoundly the misery of the world and the social barbarities; I have never felt more sharp in me the spirit of humane compassion. In certain hours of meditation, the obsession grows so strong that I feel it in my heart like the stab of a knife. . . . At such times the flood rises, rises, covers me, drowns me. By all human brutalities at once I feel myself wounded, and I have a craving to escape from life, somewhere,

anywhere. And I am haunted by Death. And then I consider above all that it is perhaps against something deaf, blind and dark that I rebel, against a machine or an element. . . .”

His songs of autumn and of evening are the breath of his own timid life, his reticence and self-denial, of his nature, compassionate and shy, craving love, and haunted with melancholy forebodings. One feels in them a kind of brooding tension, a something sickly and over-tired. Death and Pain were two unbidden guests sitting often at his table, with deep eyes of despair, and with that quiet melancholy smile which is an omen of decay. Out of his very being grew these songs, these whispered songs, which touch us with the emotion of a mauve and violet twilight. Fluid, shivering, melting verses, wherein weeps some half-uttered sentiment delicately impassioned: suave as the fall of petals on silvery water in the evening, words that do not weigh, but lightly graze the surface of emotion, words that sigh and sob and then die away in the silence of resignation.

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